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Rehabilitating Elephants: Higher Education Futures Australia

- Elephants are threatened and in decline.
- Destruction of natural habitats is a serious problem.
- There is intense friction about the role and function of elephants.
- Worldwide, elephants are protected and conservation efforts are in place.

Substituting the words higher education for the word elephant reveals a similar state of affairs. The very existence of university and college campuses is threatened by the rise of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) and industry-designed and operated vocational training. Would-be prospective students are questioning the value of higher education. There are no guarantees that university (as opposed to TAFE) education will lead to careers that are more satisfying and with higher salaries. Universities are often accused of perpetuating ivory tower thinking that leaves students ill-prepared for work. Large-size long lectures are less engaging than watching short videos, surfing websites and playing gamified learning. Is this a case of threatened elephants in decline?

Destruction of natural habitats is a serious problem

Governments, including Australia's, are proposing and enacting massive changes to higher education. The Honourable Christopher Pyne, Federal Minister for Education, in his May 2014 address to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA), stated that the proposed federal budget, "contains the biggest reform of our higher education system in 30 years". Deregulation means that universities can set their own enrolment caps and prices. Government funding of universities is being substantially cut. This equates into rising enrolment costs for students and families. The grace-period and minimum income before students are required to pay back loans and interest rates are also changing so that students have a

larger debt earlier in their careers. There is rising pressure on secondary students to choose a career in Year 10 so that they take the correct subjects in Year 11 and 12 and then stream directly into a university course with a specialised internship and launch into a career. Fourteen-year-olds and their parents are feeling ill-equipped to make significant life decisions so early.

This state of affairs is exacerbated in that digitisation of the knowledge industry means that new viable careers (titles, roles, functions and structures) are emerging in five-year time periods. In other words, the 14-year-old who has made her career decision now will likely enter a different career marketplace when she is 19, and not have taken the necessary secondary school subjects to advance into the degree of choice for the desired career. For example, there are current glimmers indicating that analysis of big data will become a viable career on a large-scale in the near future. We do not currently know what the career will be called and what the roles and functions will entail. Perhaps they will be Data Analysts and they may be applying and reporting the intricate information that is known about each of us from what we 'Google', where and when. Universities are guessing that these graduates will need skills in statistics, computer applications and business communications. These are only guesses.

There is intense friction about the role and function of elephants

The matter of universities guessing what skills graduates will need to meet the demands of emerging careers and newly structured employers raises the issue of the role and function of universities. Are universities career training centres? Is graduate employability the primary mission? Australian higher education is built-around the notion that employment outcomes are indicators of university quality. In 2008, the Australian government called for a comprehensive review of the higher education system. In what is colloquially called the 'Bradley Review',

the authors articulated a vision of higher education in 2010 as one which "produces graduates with the knowledge, skills and understandings for full participation in society as it anticipates and meets the needs of the Australian and international labour markets". More recently, the Honourable Christopher Pyne, again in his May 2014 CEDA speech, said that "the government is determined to support more young Australians to get a good education and contribute to our society and the economy through their skills and research". Notably, this quote placed the words skills and research side-by-side.

Is research the primary distinction between higher and vocational education? What is the role of theory? Are generalist, arts and humanities degrees viable in the heightened vocational context of contemporary society? In a recent graduate employability research study commissioned by the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching, 42 per cent of surveyed students and 27 per cent of graduates had completed one of the four vocationally non-specific degrees of: humanities, life sciences, computer science and/or visual/performing arts. Forty-five per cent of surveyed employers indicated that they had or would hire graduates with these degrees (Kinash, et.al., 2014). The perspective and role of employers is another critical question. To what extent should higher education be involving prospective employers in the development and delivery of curriculum and in the evaluation and assurance of higher education.

Worldwide, elephants are protected and conservation efforts are in place

The current government clearly articulates their view that reform actions are in the best interests of higher education, with a heightened emphasis on student learning. Again in his CEDA speech, the Honourable Christopher Pyne said, "I want Australia to have the best higher education system in the world". A pivot to the elephant metaphor enables a

the 14-year-old who has made her career decision now will likely enter a different career marketplace when she is 19, and not have taken the necessary secondary school subjects to advance into the degree of choice for the desired career.

stakeholder approach to determining what it means to have the best higher education system in the world and how to answer the call to that mission.

We are all familiar with the often quoted John Godfrey Saxe poem whereby each man feels a different part of the elephant and describes the creature in an entirely different way – as a rope, a wall and a spear. The poem concludes, describing a scenario that is uncomfortably familiar to university academics.

*So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!*

In subsequent interpretations of the poem's meaning, including references to Hindu and Buddhist sources, the significance of the parable is not about ignorance or right and wrong, but about the need to communicate experiences and perceptions to build and build-upon a shared understanding.

Drawing an example from the graduate employability research mentioned earlier, via survey, students were asked what strategies they are using to improve their graduate employability. Graduates were asked which strategies they used. Higher education personnel (teachers and career development professionals) were asked which of the employability strategies they provide for students. Employers were asked which of the strategies undertaken by students their organisation values when recruiting graduates.

There were three notable differences between the way in which the four stakeholder groups responded. First, regarding the strategy set of work

experience, internships and placements, 74 per cent of the responding students, 74 per cent of the graduates and 87 per cent of employers marked them on their surveys. Less than 50 per cent of higher education personnel selected this strategy. It is important to consider that this result does not mean that academics do not believe in internships, but that to the majority of survey respondents' knowledge (n=108 higher education personnel), their universities do not provide them. The second way in which stakeholders were feeling different parts of the elephant was in relation to part-time employment. A small majority of student (n=442) and graduate (n=102) respondents (each at 53 per cent) selected part-time work as a graduate employability strategy. A minority of higher education personnel and employers ticked this as a strategy. Finally, the majority of employers (60 per cent) and higher education personnel (65 per cent) selected the strategy of extra-curricular activities, whereas only a minority of students and graduates ticked this strategy. This result might be interpreted as evidence that students need to be directed to touch a different part of the elephant.

Playing with the elephant metaphor, there are larger elephants in the room than graduate employability. Here is further indication about which parts of the elephant many stakeholders are describing:

- Currently enrolled students are trying to complete their university studies before the proposed changes are scheduled to take hold in January 2016.
- Prospective students (two or more years out from university commencement) are trying to select career pathways that are more likely to support them to pay back their education loans, and/or considering

whether TAFE might be a safer option.

- Parents are worrying about how they are going to afford higher education for these sons and daughters.
- Graduates, like the currently enrolled students, are relieved that they completed prior to the fee hikes. They are feeling the pinch of a decline in employment opportunities.
- Educators are feeling the pressure to equip their students with discipline-based knowledge, skills and attributes without moving into a mechanistic and assembly-line model of education.
- Higher Education Executives / Senior Management are compelled to define their distinctive difference to convince prospective students to enrol in their institutions in a climate of heightened competition.
- Employers want graduates with skills and real-world experience. Recruits must be well-rounded, have value-alignment with the company, have healthy social supports and thereby resilience, take initiative and be goal-oriented to learn.

The employer touch of the elephant gives universities a beast of a challenge. How do universities support graduates to develop all of these employability characteristics? This message concludes with some practical strategies and approaches applied from the parable of the elephant.

The first three strategies are principles of universal design for learning (UDL). The basic meaning of UDL is that improvements to education approaches made to advance the learning of students with particular needs (e.g. students from low socio-economic status, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, students with disabling conditions) will likely benefit most, if not all, other learners. There are three main principles of UDL:

1. Multiple means of representation

Like the blind men and the elephant story, this means that educators convey knowledge, skills and attributes to students in different ways. They experience all parts of the elephant and not just with their hands, but with all the senses. This moves teachers beyond the lecture to active, engaged learning experiences. A Law Academic who recently started narrating her slideshows and putting them up online for students to watch before class so that she could use the allocated on-campus time to supervise her students' active skills practice said, "I've never thought so much about how I teach, who I teach, what I teach and when I teach it since I started blending my delivery".

2. Multiple means of engagement


Some students are going to be motivated by touching the elephant and others are going to need to hop on and go for a ride. There is no disputing that contemporary university students' exposure to the jolt-culture of computer games has heightened entertainment expectations of their education. Educators are called to engage students in multiple ways, such as by using social media and gamified learning.

3. Multiple means of expression

The confusion over the nature of the elephant might have been moved to resolution earlier if the men had lived in the era of technology-enabled communication. They would have probably each posted to Facebook and laughed about their misunderstanding. Blindness would not have been an issue because screen-reading technology would have read out the posts. Rather than the gruesome expression – *there is more than one way of skinning a cat* – the substitution is made that there is

more than one way to train an elephant. Students are usually confined to a single prescribed method of demonstrating their learning. Articulating the learning outcomes rather than the format (e.g. a formal essay as opposed to a blog) means that students can practice their employability attributes of taking initiative and being creative.

The final strategy extends above and beyond the individual subject to the packaging of the whole degree. Currently, universities identify the metaphoric parts of the elephant and put them together into one solid non-negotiable animal. A business degree is made up of particular core subjects and a computer science degree of different ones. The student signs-up for an elephant encounter. This does not allow for personalised educational pathways and minimises responsiveness to emerging careers. Instead, as the student learns that he needs a metaphoric tusk, a trunk and a tail to pursue the desired path, the university must find a way to help him create this new creative combination.

In short, the current climate of higher education change is an opportunity to rehabilitate the elephants of higher education. 

Dr Shelley Kinash is the Director of Learning and Teaching, and Associate Professor Higher Education at Bond University on the Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia. Shelley has been an academic for twenty years, first in Canada and then in Australia. Her PhD topic was blind online learners and she is an active researcher in the field of education. She is currently conducting collaborative, inter-university research on assurance of learning, and university improvement and student engagement through student evaluation of courses and teaching.

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